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ABSTRACT

Recent empirical and theoretical literature was reviewed to examine how the dynamics of class, gender, and race affect adult learning in nonformal and informal settings. The following were among the key findings: (1) social dynamics such as class, gender, and race influence individuals' development of their self or subjectivity, which in turn affects their ability and decisions to participate in learning; (2) class, gender, and race also affect teachers and their pedagogies and curricular decisions; (3) another way social dynamics affect learning is through allocating resources, including economic, political, and sociocultural resources, unequally within society in general and within specific learning situations; (4) class, gender, and race affect learning through curricular materials and the tools that are used in teaching-learning interactions; (5) the dynamics of class, gender, and race affect learning by affecting the dynamics within nonformal and informal organizations and the interactions of those organizations with other social actors; (6) because class, gender, and race influence have significant effects on individuals and the learning context, using a theoretical framework that includes consideration of class, gender, and race influence may provide a way for researchers and practitioners to connect individual and contextual factors when studying their effect on learning. (Contains 27 references.) (MN)

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Theorizing the Effects of Class, Gender, and Race on Adult Learning in Nonformal and Informal Settings

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Abstract: This paper theorizes how the dynamics of class, gender, and race affect adult learning in nonformal and informal settings in four ways: formation of subjectivity, positionality/access to resources, curriculum, and interactions within and between organizations. It suggests directions for research and practice.

Much adult learning theory has focused on characteristics of adult learners (Clark, 1993). Recently, adult educators have begun to look at how contextual factors affect adult learning through disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow, 1991), situated cognition (Hansman, 2001), interpretation of context (Marsick and Watkins, 2001) and adult development (Merriam and Clark, 1991). However, an important group of contextual factors remains undertheorized in the adult education literature (Caffarella and Merriam, 1999). This includes dynamics such as class, gender, race, physical ability, and sexual orientation and their effects on learning. Some empirical studies have begun to identify the effects of these on learning in higher education and workplace settings (Tisdell, 1993; Cervero, Wilson and Associates, 2001). The results indicate that these dynamics have a powerful effect on society and learning. This paper seeks to theorize how these dynamics affect learning in nonformal and informal settings, filling a gap in our theory and suggesting ways to broaden and deepen existing theories.

Class, gender, and race are social constructions (Connell, 1987; Omi and Winant, 1994) based on some physical characteristics. Their meanings are constantly being reconstructed in social relations. In the United States, these three dynamics have been constructed in ways which create unequal, interlocking hierarchies of power in economic, political, and social spheres (Apple and Weis, 1986).

A review of research studies and my own research suggest that class, gender, and race influence learning through four major processes: through construction of subjectivity, through positionality and allocation of resources, through curriculum, and by affecting group dynamics and group interactions with other social actors. These four processes are separated here for the purposes of clarity, but in reality the processes overlap considerably.

Each of these processes will be described briefly, along with references to research. This theorizing will certainly not be able to predict all of the complex ways that class, gender, and race will interact in any given situation, but it can provide guidance for researchers as they explore teaching/learning interactions. Expanding our body of research can also have implications for practice, as described in the paper's concluding section.

Development of Identity and Subjectivity

Social dynamics such as class, gender, and race influence individuals' development of their understanding of self, or their subjectivity. This happens through processes of primary socialization and secondary socialization into new subcultures throughout peoples' lives (Jarvis, 1987). It is important to note that this is not a passive process in which people simply receive the dominant culture's expectations, but rather, an interactive process in which people negotiate meanings and identity (e.g., African Americans taking the term "black" as a source of pride and power; homosexuals taking the slur "queer" and redefining it as a term of pride.) Subjectivity is developed in interaction with others and

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continues to change over time and in different settings.

The importance of this for learning is that the process of developing subjectivity clearly affects learners' perceptions of themselves and their capabilities and their decisions to participate (Hayes and Flannery, 2000) and it affects teachers and their pedagogies and curricular decisions. To the extent that subjectivity is developed in interaction with unequal constructions of class, gender, and race, learners and teachers are privileged and harmed in differing ways.

In the context of nonformal and informal organizations, learners are affected by the unequal value placed on class, gender, and race and the effect this has on their perceptions of themselves. At the same time, when these organizations work from an emancipatory agenda, they can be places for learners to challenge oppressive constructions of class, gender, and race. For example, Bingham (1995) found that all of the women participating in the community center programs she studied were coming because of their role as care-takers for their families, a gender-related role. While participating, one woman realized she was "an intelligent lady" (p. 185), changing her earlier perception of herself. Women who had experienced domestic violence and were participating in a transitional housing program began to see themselves as capable, skilled women (Cain and Kjar, 2001).

In my study of women trying to remove toxic and radioactive waste from their neighborhood, several of the women changed their perception of themselves as learners as they mastered very complex information and became "citizen experts" on the technical issues involved in the dispute (Cain, 1998).

Although the subjectivity of teachers and its effects have been studied more in formal settings (Brown, Cervero, and Johnson-Bailey, 2000; Tisdell, 1993), these studies would suggest that leaders in nonformal organizations are also affected by their own subjectivity.

In summary, class, gender, and race influence learning through their role in people's sense of self, or subjectivity. This effect is inequitable to the extent that people internalize the unequal value given to these dynamics in society's construction of them. Nonformal and informal organizations can be places where participants develop more positive understandings of themselves.

Positionality and Allocation of Resources

A second way that social dynamics affect learning is through allocating resources unequally within society. These resources can be economic, political, and socio-cultural and they can be apportioned in society on the basis of combinations of class, gender, race, and other dynamics. The importance of this for learning is that people's position in hierarchies of power and the resulting access to resources enable and constrain learning.

In nonformal and informal settings, access to resources has two main effects. One effect is to shape the experiences that people bring to the setting and their perceptions of what actions they may undertake. In pursuing these strategies and actions people learn different kinds of knowledge. The second effect is the more direct effect of access to resources in a given learning situation.

Harding (1996) found that the types of experiences people have as a result of their social position strongly affects the way they can know the world and what they count as knowledge. She cites a stereotypical example in which women learn more about babies and men learn more about car motors (p. 443). In addition, she found that people have different resources for developing knowledge based on their position in hierarchies of power. Those in positions of power have different resources than those on the borderlands; this affects what they are able to know.

In my study of the neighborhood groups (1998), I found that the group of working class women saw their options for strategies as very limited. They initially used protest tactics because they had no experience accessing people in positions of power, nor had they had opportunities to learn the cultural capital of the decision-makers. When they realized they were being perceived as "apron-wearing

fanatics," they shifted to a strategy of becoming technical experts. The addition of two college-educated women to the group at this point helped provide the necessary experience to move ahead with the new strategy. Another group formed later in the struggle and its members were middle-class, mostly men. They all had business experience and perceived that their best approach was to sit down with the CEO of the $172 billion company that owned the site and work out a gentlemen's agreement. They eschewed the protest strategies of the other group, seeking instead to use their cultural capital to access decision-makers such as the CEO, congressional representatives, and the mayor. Clearly the gender- and class-mediated experiences participants brought to these two groups affected their perceptions of possible actions and therefore affected what each group learned as they pursued their strategies.

Access to resources affects learning in a second way: lack of resources can constrain learning and simultaneously force groups to learn. This does not happen in a mechanistic, one-way fashion that robs people of agency. Rather, it is a contradictory process through which relative lack of resources simultaneously encourages and constrains learning. An example is the way that residents were constrained by the lack of resources they had vis a vis the corporation that owned the site, but they were still able to act. They expected the state to use its resources on their behalf and when this didn't happen, they mobilized popular power through protests, petitions, group appearances in court, media coverage, and a ballot initiative. They greatly increased public awareness of the dump site and changed public perceptions about its appropriateness. Their relative lack of power forced them to learn emancipatory knowledge about the contradictory role of the state and about the functioning of social systems. They also learned a tremendous amount of technical knowledge as they carried out their various strategies. In this way the relative lack of resources fostered learning of some types of knowledge.

At the same time the groups generated power in a different form and learned about power and technical knowledge, their ability to generate power and learn was constrained (not determined) by the resources they had or could develop. For example, most were doing this work in addition to full-time employment, which limited the time they had for learning. They had limited financial resources for hiring lawyers or technical experts who could teach them. In this way, their reduced access to resources encouraged certain learning and at the same time constrained their learning.

The importance of this for adult educators is that this research shows the effects of unequal allocation of resources work in complex and subtle ways beyond basic notions of ability to "buy" education or sharing cultural capital with educators. Understanding the ways this happens might prove more useful than the vague and general ways in which adult educators have talked about the role of experience in education. This framework can help illuminate the complex ways in which the resources people have to draw upon are shaped by social structures and dynamics, rather than being strictly a function of an individual's life experiences. This approach politicizes the question of experience and forces educators to consider social factors that shape that experience in addition to individual factors such as life circumstances and psychological traits.

Curriculum

A third way that class, gender, and race affect adult learning is through curricular materials and the tools (Hansman, 2001) that are used in teaching/learning interactions. The ways these materials are biased by gender, race, and class have been well-documented elsewhere (Anyon, 1981; Apple, 1988; Quigley and Holsinger, 1993; Tisdell, 1993) and so won't be dealt with in detail here. In some nonformal settings and especially in informal settings, curricular materials play a lesser role than they do in formal settings. However, their presence must be considered along with the hidden curriculum that drives nonformal programs. Again, this must be considered in an active way because participants negotiate the meanings of curricula and hidden curricula rather than receiving them passively. Class, gender, and race affect the curricular materials and they also affect the meaning-making process of

leaders and participants.

Operation of Dynamics within and between Organizations

A fourth way the dynamics of class, gender, and race affect learning is through the way they affect the dynamics within nonformal and informal organizations and the interactions of these organizations with other social actors.

In the same way that Tisdell (1993) found that class, gender, and race affected the dynamics of classroom interaction, I found that these dynamics had a powerful effect on the way the middle-class social movement group operated, whose voices were attended to, and how decisions were made (1998). Learning was affected through the hidden curriculum of the group meetings and by the lost potential for learning caused by the departure of many members who refused to participate in group meetings.

This group met frequently and at its inception had well over a dozen active members. In five months the group was down to three male "regulars" and a few sporadic participants. Group meetings were characterized as "chaos", a clash of personalities, a clash of values and goals, and sexist. Several attempts by (mostly female) group members to organize the group meetings were unsuccessful and the three male regulars continued to control the meetings through interruptions, anger, and spontaneous actions. Several members tried to have the group make decisions by consensus, but their efforts were unsuccessful. This group dynamic was affected primarily by gender relations in the way that gender shaped the experiences and values that people brought to the group and by the way gender affected the exercise of power within the group. One example of this effect is that most of the women involved were from social service professions and valued consensus and democratic practices. The men came from business backgrounds which have traditionally favored competitive and hierarchical relations. Gender also affected the group dynamic by affecting how power was able to be exercised. Again, one example is that women who expressed anger were discounted but men who expressed anger were attended to. In other ways too complex to describe here, unequal constructions of gender affected how power was able to be exercised by different group members.

The importance of this for learning is that so many of the initial participants, including all the women, learned that their contributions were not valued and they quit the group. The group lost the potential resources these participants could have brought that would have helped them achieve their expressed desire to work by consensus in a new paradigm.

Other researchers have found that the group experience can have very positive learning outcomes for participants. This happens in many groups designed for women (Bingham, 1985; Cain and Kjar, 2001; Foley, 1999; Hart, 1990; Kastner, 1993) and suggests the usefulness of further exploration of gender as a dynamic affecting these groups and organizations.

Class, gender, and race also affect the relative power that informal groups have to pursue their goals vis a vis corporate and governmental actors in a conflict. To the extent that power is allocated based on class, gender, and race, it affects the learning that will occur among group members as they struggle. In the case of both the groups in the neighborhood struggle, the members had relatively less power than the corporation or the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. This included fewer financial resources (including the ability to hire technical experts and lawyers and the ability to influence the political process), fewer political resources (e.g., unequal weighting of public comment in the legal process of decision-making), and cultural resources (including the ability to define "acceptable" levels of toxicity). As a result of having fewer resources and feeling less powerful, members of both groups learned emancipatory knowledge (Habermas, 1971). They became aware of the federal government's need to simultaneously legitimate itself and promote the accumulation of capital. They saw how social structures worked in this case and became aware of how much more power was given to the

corporation. Many became politicized and developed a structural analysis. While having relatively less power did constrain some learning (as in the contradictory process described above), it also encouraged other forms of learning.

Other researchers have found members of informal groups learned similar emancipatory knowledge about the way social structures work through their position of lesser power in interactions with other social actors (Foley, 1999; Kastner, 1993; McKnight, 1995, and Scott, 1991).

Implications for Research and Practice

The emerging theoretical framework I have described here could be useful in guiding research and in helping practitioners see how their practice can be more equitable.

This theory may provide a way to bridge a gap in the literature identified by Caffarella and Merriam (1999). They encourage adult educators to consider how individual factors and contextual factors interact in affecting learning. Class, gender, and race significantly affect individuals (through development of subjectivity and through allocation of resources and life experiences) and they significantly affect context (through curriculum and through the interaction of learners with each other and other social actors). This theoretical framework may provide a way to connect individual and contextual factors in studying their effect on learning.

The goal here is not to create a universal theory, but rather to provide a road map for researchers that identifies where to look for the effects of these dynamics and how their processes might affect learning in those processes. I believe that research will continue to show that there are some consistent patterns in the effects of class, gender, and race on learning and that in each teaching/learning interaction there will also be unique effects because these dynamics are so complex.

Finally, this theoretical framework can make a contribution to practice. To the extent that it helps adult educators see how these social dynamics affect learning, especially in inequitable ways, it can help adult educators see how we can be more effective and just by working to reduce these inequities in our teaching.

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